



A NATIONAL DIALOGUE:

The **Secretary** of **Education's Commission** on the **Future** of **Higher Education**

SUMMARY OF MEETING

May 18, 2006, Washington, D.C.

The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education met in Washington, D.C. on May 18 and 19 to begin building consensus around major issues facing higher education: accessibility, affordability, accountability, workforce development, institutional efficiency and effectiveness, and innovation. A summary of testimony from national meetings and public hearings, reports, studies, and letters were distributed to Commissioners and prioritized for discussion prior to the meeting. During the meeting, Commissioners were encouraged to identify key issues and discuss possible recommendations for each area with a consistent level of thought and language for a final report now due to Secretary Spellings in mid-September.

Remarks by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings

"Elevate the public debate and discourse . . ."

Secretary Margaret Spellings commended the panel for its efforts "to elevate the public debate and discourse around issues in higher education." She noted that the Commissioners "have hit a nerve" and urged them to "be as concrete and as bold" as they possibly could in their recommendations. "I don't want you to be shy or mealy mouthed . . . be as specific as you possibly can," she said, "not only with respect to what the country ought to do or the Congress ought to do, but for what we at the Department of Education can do and what state policy makers can do. Think broadly about the various actors." Emphasizing the federal government's considerable financial investment in higher education, the Secretary noted, "We need to make sure that we are maximizing and investing those resources as wisely as possible on behalf of students and our country." Finally, she asked for the Commissioners' leadership and guidance in developing recommendations that will address these important issues. "I am very open-minded about what you might recommend," she said.

Universal Access and Preparation

Preparing a Nation of Learners

Commissioners noted that ensuring individual prosperity and securing a healthy, vibrant national economy for the future require expanded access to higher education opportunities for all Americans, particularly for low income and minority students. Others also emphasized the importance of adequate K-12 preparation to encourage progression through higher education, which the Commissioners more broadly defined to include certificate and workforce development programs beyond high school in addition to traditional two- and four-year degrees.

A number of issues related to access and preparation were identified, including the spiraling cost of education and rising tuition rates; a complex financial aid system that is too focused on merit rather than need; the decreased availability of higher education opportunities in rural America; high school curricula that are not rigorous nor aligned with higher education and workforce needs; and roadblocks that prevent students from transferring credits from two-year to four-year institutions.

Some commissioners asked additional questions for thought: *Can we really afford to provide a four-year liberal arts education to everyone who wants it? Is access the biggest problem in higher education or is it progression through the system?*

The Commissioners discussed the following potential solutions: putting more resources into higher education to encourage access, progression, and degree completion, particularly for low income, minority, and nontraditional students; simplifying financial aid systems and increasing aid to low-income students on the federal, state, institutional and even corporate levels; and recognizing the role of community colleges as the vehicle for universal access. To address concerns about preparation, some commissioners discussed the merits of using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam administered in the 12th grade in order to obtain state-by-state analysis of college and workforce readiness.

Affordability

Making Higher Education More Affordable

Postsecondary education is becoming less affordable for greater numbers of Americans, including low income and minority students, and is a major cause of early college withdrawal. In the past decade, tuition has increased at twice the rate of personal income. Commissioners discussed the increased financial pressure that higher education institutions are placing on students, many of whom are accruing significant amounts of debt to pay for college.

Another topic related to affordability is the complexity of federal financial aid programs. The seventeen federal financial aid programs that exist may be inefficient and confusing for students and families. Many Commissioners discussed the need to streamline these programs and emphasize need-based rather than merit-based aid.

In developing potential solutions, Commissioners discussed producing the right incentives to encourage higher education institutions to control cost, operate more efficiently, and harness innovative educational delivery methods. Commissioners also called for a simplification of the federal financial aid processes.

Accountability: Assessment and Consumer Information

Maximizing Our Investment in Higher Education

Commissioners asked, *What do we value and what do we reward in higher education?* The need for increased accountability is paramount, given the public's significant

investment in higher education. However, basic questions on the return on that investment remain unanswered. *How does higher education measure student learning and educational effectiveness? How valuable is an education at a particular institution? What do students and taxpayers get for their money?*

Colleges and universities must more accurately measure their outputs and make that information available to the public in a user-friendly manner, according to some Commissioners. Increased accountability to the public would lead to increased efficiency and improve the quality of students' educational experience.

Currently there are several instruments officials can use to provide information on student learning such as the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CSSE), and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). Commission members debated the methodology of the instruments, and noted that measuring outputs and having student outcome data is critical to maximizing public investment in higher education and helping colleges and universities become more effective and efficient.

Accountability: Accreditation

Assuring High Education Quality

Accreditation, the complex self-regulatory system that assures higher education quality, must become more transparent and move institutions from minimal compliance to world-class quality, according to some Commissioners. Although other Commissioners believe that accreditation is a permanent part of the higher education mosaic and already provides a useful vehicle for self-improvement, greater gains can be made in producing measurable outcomes and spurring institutional innovation. Other Commissioners pointed to the often-disjointed array of accreditation agencies and identified it as a barrier to the transferability of credits between institutions. Commissioners also challenged accreditors to open the process and engage external stakeholders such as business leaders to ensure that institutional improvements are meeting workforce standards and needs.

Potential solutions identified by the Commissioners include a national accreditation framework that emphasizes measures of student learning, encourages innovation in practice that focuses on demonstrated outcomes rather than prescribed inputs, is transparent, and builds on the Baldrige approach of continuous improvement.

SUMMARY OF MEETING

May 19, 2006, Washington, D.C.

Workforce Development and Meeting Labor Market Needs

Meeting Workforce and Labor Market Needs

Commissioners reviewed statistics on changing demographics in higher education, focusing on gender, age, and income level. The data showed an overall increase in higher education participation from 1970-2004 but also indicated a mix of positive and negative trends. While the percentage of nontraditional students in higher education has increased relative to other age levels, major gaps exist between males and females in obtaining postsecondary degrees (7.4 million and 9.9 million, respectively in 2004). Additionally, participation in postsecondary education is still more likely among persons with higher incomes.

Commissioners observed that the emerging global workforce and economic conditions would require changes in America's higher education system. Especially because some postsecondary work is increasingly becoming the minimum standard of achievement for success in the modern workplace, Commissioners noted the importance of increasing accessibility to all segments of the population and providing flexibility for both degree-based and career advancement education. While the focus of comments was on increased alignment between higher education and industry, particularly through programs such as internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of direct workplace experience, several Commissioners reminded the group of the importance of a broad, liberal arts foundation in addition to technical competency.

The Commissioners also discussed creating a national strategy for lifelong learning, which some termed a "continuous investment in human capital." A related issue for many students, especially adult learners, is the difficulty in transferring credits between institutions, which increase cost and time to degree. Commissioners also spoke of "the missing American worker" as a metaphor for the participation gaps based on economic, racial, gender, and geographic factors. Several Commissioners questioned if there would be a dearth of jobs in the future workforce because of the focus on increasing the supply of higher education participants, especially high skilled students.

Increasing Supply Address Capacity

Improving Institutional Effectiveness and Efficiency

Commissioner discussions on improving effectiveness and efficiency in higher education were couched in the call for greater accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the nation. Areas debated included college student attrition, advocacy for national retention goals, and a call for improved data to measure significant changes in student achievement.

Commissioners noted the potential causes of student attrition, which include inadequate advising on college campuses and an institutional culture that rewards research but not teaching. Some Commissioners also observed that the higher education system often filters human talent, increasing selectivity in admissions to increase institutional rank instead of expanding capacity and developing student potential. In response, some Commissioners noted the important and growing role of community colleges.

The preparation of students again caused a debate among Commissioners as some blamed inadequacies in the K-12 system while others placed the responsibility on the higher education community. Commissioners also pondered if the federal government should attempt to improve institutional efficiency and effectiveness through incentives. Some suggested requiring undergraduate focus as part of the research funding process.

Innovation

Responding to the Needs of the 21st Century

The core competency of the American economy is its capacity to innovate and the Nation needs to nurture and cultivate continued innovation. American innovation is being stifled by obsolete curricula, an aversion to taking risks, costly tuition, inadequate numbers dedicated to the STEM disciplines—science, technology, engineering, math, and an education system unresponsive to the needs of the 21st century. Lawmakers, higher education officials, and the public must address these issues. Many Commissioners suggested that the key actors who will drive institutional innovation are faculty members. Others advocated for a strong liberal arts base and recognized that general knowledge in math and science may be inadequate against the demands of a knowledge-based, services-driven global economy.

Identification of Gaps / New Areas

Determining Additional Issues Pertinent to Higher Education

In a free-flowing session, Commissioners created a list of issues not discussed during this meeting that may be considered for inclusion in the final report. They included: the role of philanthropy in higher education; immigration and visa policies; creating a charge to faculty; the overregulation of higher education; transferability of credits; the rising cost of extracurricular activities; augmenting research on learning; grade inflation; and university governance.

Commission Discussion and Wrap-Up

Identifying Next Steps

Commissioners reviewed challenges identified in each topic area and were encouraged to consider which recommendations would produce realistic changes. The goal, Commissioners agreed, is to use accurate data to develop bold recommendations that will serve the Secretary's charge.